

As you have heard and read these verses of Mark's Gospel account, what stands out for you? Did any part of this rich writing sort of stop your mind at any certain point? I can confidently venture that, for some of you, the subject of divorce arises to the top of these verses. Raise your hand if you know someone who has experienced divorce~~~No less than four times we read the word 'divorce' or 'divorces' in this text. Add to this that Jesus mentions "adultery" two times. These are incendiary, combustible subjects in our day and age. I have actually been in conversation with fellow pastors who openly admit they often avoid these verses when it is their Sunday to preach.

I can, though, understand such trepidation. One Sunday, years ago, when I preached on this sometimes troublesome text, I received a phone call at home later that afternoon. A man I had never met asked me: "What in the world did you preach on this morning?" Caught off guard by the question from a stranger who obviously had not been in worship with us that morning, I attempted to describe my intended message. The caller asked: "So, you didn't tell my twice-married-son-in-law to go home and divorce my daughter?" Not totally certain of everything I had said in the sermon that morning, I was certain I had not said that. Yet, this man's son in law had, in fact, come home from worship, took off his wedding ring, handed it to his wife, and said: 'Pastor Powell told me that being married to you after divorcing my first wife is adultery...so, this marriage is over!' Clearly, this man misunderstood and mistakenly focused upon the 'divorce-related' verses in this text and nothing else. Sad...This couple, did, in fact, get divorced...#2 for that man.

This Gospel is about divorce...and so much more. This is not simply a condemnation of **divorce**, it is a preservation of the **human family** and protection of God's institution of **marriage**. In these same verses in Mark's Gospel Jesus speaks about **God's original**

intention...that *'at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female".'* When Jesus makes this statement, he actually quotes from the portion of Genesis we've also read and heard this morning. As I've said before, when Jesus quotes the Old Testament, we do well to 'listen up'. Such a quoting by the Only Begotten Son of God grants deep and convincing testimony to the validity, to the timeless value of these godly truths. In these same verses in Genesis, the point is clearly made that **men and women are created equal**. Adam recognizes the uniqueness of the woman, veritably shouting: *'This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.'* Any talk of Christianity minimizing and/or degrading woman reveals an ignorance of Holy Scripture. I will go so far as to say that the biblical teaching about divorce is strong evidence of the value God places upon women, particularly women who lived in a culture and time in which they were afforded little to no value at all.

Jesus speaks about **marriage**, a union God intends to exist between a man and his wife...a union through which *'they are no longer two, but one flesh.'* Add to this, Jesus acknowledges that when God unites one man and one woman as husband and wife...made 'one', in marriage...**'no one' should** do anything that could **cause the** God-united **couple to 'separate'**. Jesus extends the blame and responsibility for divorce, not only to the husband and wife, but to each and every other person who contributes to the couples' divorce.

Instructing his listeners then and now, Jesus speaks about **the value** and exemplary trust **of 'children'**...even specifying *'little children'*. Jesus is not telling people of all ages to act childish. Rather, Jesus points directly to the 'trust' and 'openness' displayed by little children, saying: *'Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'* Let us not miss what Jesus does next: *'He took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.'* [Mk. 10: 16] The very children the first

disciples were rebuking, telling their parents to stop *'bringing little children to Jesus'*, Jesus welcomes with open arms.

Lastly, Jesus attempts to draw **the timeless distinction between what is 'legal'** and allowed under the law, **and what is moral** and intended by God. Just because disciples of Jesus are 'allowed', by law, to do something doesn't mean it is necessarily the right or moral thing to do. Jesus does not refute the fact that *'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and'* could *'send his wife away.'* Jesus does, though, point out to his first century-questioners that this Law of Moses is the result of their sinfulness and because their *'hearts were hard.'* Jesus reminds all with ears to hear that God's intention...**God's will**...is that one man and one woman marry, become 'one flesh', and remain so 'until death' ultimately separates them. To do otherwise is, according to Holy Scripture, contrary to God's original intention and, thus, sin.

With that said, hoping you are still listening, **divorce is not** to be considered **an 'unforgiveable sin'**. Whenever we act in opposition to God's will, we are implored to come humbly before God with confession and to seek God's forgiveness. Lutherans do not offer an annulment, as does the Roman Catholic Church, officially pronouncing that a couple was never actually married, rather than acknowledging a couple is actually divorced. Instead, Lutherans call everything that is contrary to God's will a 'sin' and implore the sinners to acknowledge whatever part they have played and to ask God for His mercy, forgiveness, and grace. To do so is yet a further example of exhibiting the trust shown us by *'little children'*.

So, what stands out for you in our lessons this morning? They are packed with timeless truths...some that bring comfort and some that don't. Through all the verses before us is the uniting thread of God's intention and God's ongoing offer to forgive the repentant and love the children...children of any and every age! Amen.

